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Issue 10 (2019)

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Decoding Fantasy Football: A Ludic Perspectiveⁱ

Aditya Deshbandhu

Abstract

Fantasy sport has risen in popularity in the last decade with the advent of web 2.0. As people from around the world watch sporting events today, the Internet has become an ideal site to instantly disseminate results and achievements for avid fans and followers. This article is an attempt to position fantasy sports in the realm of game studies, drawing from the specific case of fantasy football (soccer in North America). Borrowing from and building on Roger Caillois' classical game typology, this article seeks to arrive at a nuanced understanding of both fantasy sport as a game and the experience it offers to participants. By using an ethnographic approach, based on in-depth interviews and co-playing sessions, this study closely observes participants' in-game performances in the *Fantasy Premier League*. By stitching together information from the interviews with observation of participants' approaches and preferences along with the performance of their teams, this article identifies the key decisions and processes that a player of fantasy sport is part of. By situating fantasy sport in the ludic debate of preparation versus luck, this article offers unique insights into the various ways that players exert effort to succeed at the game. The use of an approach that examines what players do to their fantasy teams enables this paper to examine players' psyches and the interrelated elements of fandom, favoritism and loyalty. Analysis of the data offers insights in to the various practices and approaches of players as well as lays the foundation of new concepts.

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Keywords: digital games, Fantasy sport, fantasy football, engagement, involvement, gamified viewing, gameenvironments

To cite this article: Deshbandhu, A., 2019. Decoding Fantasy Football: A Ludic Perspective. *gamevironments* 10, 85-116. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

Introduction

Fantasy sport is defined by Dwyer and Drayer as an ancillary sport service. They understand it to be a primarily online activity that draws heavily from real world sports statistics (Dwyer and Drayer 2010, 1). By calling it a completely customizable and interactive service, they identify it as a part of every major professional sport (Dwyer and Drayer 2010, 1). Ruihley and Hardin (2011) also consider fantasy sport to be an interactive activity that is based on the accrual of data from athletes' performances in their sport. They consider the activity to be a part of a "sports-focused landscape" where knowledge of the sport, statistical ability, socialization come together in one competitive platform (Ruihley and Hardin 2011, 233). Owing to the service's inherently interactive nature (Dwyer and Drayer 2010, Ruihley and Hardin 2011) and its need to engage with a widespread player base, fantasy sport has found an ideal home on the Internet. Fantasy sport platforms have become extremely popular in the last decade owing to the widening reach of the Internet and the successful rolling out of Web 2.0, as Web 2.0's inherent functionalities natively allow for high levels of interactivity and customizability (Lister et al. 2008).

The annual FSTA (Fantasy Sports Trade Association) estimated the number of players for the service to be at around 59.3 million in 2017 in North America alone (Industry Demographics 2018). With regards to the site of this article's study, the *Fantasy Premier League (FPL)*, it is a service with over 6.3 million players worldwide. The reason for its international popularity is the fact that it draws its statistics from the popular football tournament the English Premier League (EPL)ⁱⁱ. Given the tournament and the service's increasingly global prevalence, this article seeks to use it to examine fantasy sport through a ludological lens and situate it in the discipline of game studies.

Existing research and popular media coverage on fantasy sport credit the origin of the activity to three specific individuals. Schwarz credits Harvard professor William Gamson for creating an informal version of the activity by basing it upon professional baseball in 1960 (Schwarz 2004). Newsnet 5's Green cites the formulation of a league by Wilfred 'Bill' Winkenbach on American football in 1962 as the first recorded instance of an organized fantasy sport (Green 2014). Lastly, Farquhar and Meeds (2007) in their paper identify the statistician Glen Waggoner for his league in the 1980s as the creator. While the origins of the activity are open to dispute, what remains certain is its reliance on statistics. Thus, the shift to a digital system with the arrival of the Internet allows the activity to realize its potential and, in the process, become accessible to millions of users worldwide. Today, as predicted by Dwyer and Drayer (2010, 1), fantasy-based activities are available for most popular global sports on innumerable platforms as avid followers of sport vie for the supremacy of their virtual teams.

It is difficult to estimate the size of the global market of fantasy sports, although reports peg the fantasy football market in the USA (American Football and NFL) at around USD 7 Billion in 2017 (Rodriguez 2017). With a steady year-on-year increase in number of players, the global market is also bound to potentially increase across sports (Industry Demographics 2018). Billings and Ruihley also indicate similar trends for the global scale by stating "In virtually all developed and developing nations fantasy sport participation is expanding" (Billings and Ruihley 2013, 147).

The scope of this article is to primarily examine fantasy sport as a game and then by situating it in a ludological frame examine it using a media as practice approach (Couldry 2004). By employing an ethnographic, qualitative research design, this paper allows fantasy sport to be studied in perspectives that vary from the oft used uses

and gratification model. By examining fantasy sport in a dialectics of chance and knowledge this paper offers unique insights on players' practices and approaches towards the game. The use of *FPL* and *EPL* allows us to use participants' responses and actions to not only examine their levels of engagement but also observe and analyze the personal processes they have developed in this regard.

Fantasy Football in India

Fantasy sport is not new to India and its popularity was first noted in 2004 when there were 750,000 players reported to be engaging with fantasy cricket (Pfanner 2004). This article however, focuses on fantasy football (soccer in North America) based activity in the country, *FPL* in particular. Cricket as a sport enjoys a uniquely dominant position in India and every other sport in the country is constantly vying for second place both in terms of viewership and in terms loyalty (Majumdar and Brown 2007, Majumdar 2003). *FPL* is in a unique position with this regard as it is tied into a competition (the EPL) that is wooing India and China as potential markets. Initiatives by the EPL to further a viewer base in India include scheduling of matches for times that are Asia friendly and the creation of tailor-made TV content. By choosing football and in particular *FPL* over cricket, this study can accurately examine the engagement of the Indian sports fan with a sport-based tournament that is neither played nor governed in the nation they reside. This in conjunction with the strategic airing of sports broadcast content by the EPL allows us to examine how the *FPL* could be a vital element in the creation of an entirely new loyal and dedicated viewer base.

India specific data from the 2017-18 and 2018-19 seasons of the *FPL* (data mined from the India specific league on the *FPL* website, FPL 2019) indicates that there were over 200,000 participants in both the seasons (the number is over 220,000 for the just concluded 2018-19 season) – a number that is significant enough to allow for

engagement with the activity to be examined critically. This study draws on the interviews and experiences of nine *FPL* players based in the city of Hyderabad, India to examine players' engagements.

Studying Fantasy Football

To classify fantasy sport as a game, I would like to use the classification suggested by Jaakko Stenros. He defines games either as activities, formal systems or as social constructs (Stenros 2015). Fantasy Sport in its various forms/modes is a predominantly online activity with a detailed and complex formal system that awards its players points depending on sporting outcomes of athletes and the teams they represent. Through this frame, it becomes clear that the rules that govern various fantasy sport activities determine how points are calculated, attributed and earned. Thus, by fulfilling two out of the three classes that Stenros espouses Fantasy Sport can be termed a game. The argument can be further reinforced by using Juul's understanding of games as rule-based systems with variable outcomes where players need to exert effort to achieve a negotiable favorable outcome (Juul 2011). By fulfilling both Juul's understanding and Stenros' classification, fantasy sport falls within the scope of ludological enquiry (Aarseth 2001, Frasca 2013). In fantasy sport, each participant in the game exerts effort to sway the outcome in his/her favor. The player has an emotional connection with their outcome and thus, every manager of a fantasy football team seeks the best possible outcome by putting in as much effort as possible to the highest number of points (Juul 2011).

Given the single natured commitment of most fantasy players to win and seek pleasurable outcomes by accruing as many points as possible, studying this commitment (of players) allows us to interpret fantasy sports using the classical game typology suggested by Caillois (1957). Caillois categorizes gameworthy activities into

follow and their understanding of football as a sport allow for analyzing the engagement of the players from a media as practice approach (Couldry 2004). Couldry's understanding of media as practice looks at what people do to media on a regular/everyday basis and that framework seems apt to study fantasy sports where the game space is reconfigured at regular intervals (Couldry 2004). By examining, what the players are doing to their teams in conjunction with the constant unpredictability of the sport and the *FPL* game mode we are then offered insights into the various aspects that players of fantasy sports consider while making crucial decisions in game.

Method

While most research on fantasy sport is largely quantitative in nature (Ruihley and Hardin 2011, Ruihley and Billings 2013, Billings and Ruihley 2013) this article draws on qualitative data from a pool of participants who were well versed with fantasy football and had prior experience of participation in the *FPL* specific iteration. The use of an ethnographic approach and a qualitative research design allows for an examination of players' psyche, experiences and practices that quantitative research methods and data collection tools like online surveys cannot offer. A special effort was made during the selection process to include participants who had participated in other fantasy sport modes.

For this study a player was defined as someone who had successfullyⁱⁱⁱ participated for an entire season's duration in *FPL*. In order to build the participant pool, a snowball sampling technique was used where two participants served as the points of

"You always want to go up every week, the best thing about FPL is that there is always room for a quick reversal. I play the game to see how high I can finish but also to see if the players I picked in my team were worth picking. When my players do well it shows that I understand the game better than the others who didn't do well." (Kaushik, Personal Interview, 15 August 2017)

All the participants of the study were aware of the fact that they were playing on a global scale and they viewed FPL as a platform to showcase their in-game skill to fellow players worldwide. Kaushik's impetus on picking the right players was a key area of interest throughout the study's duration as when matches went live often Whatsapp messages in the *FPL* group would begin with the simple question "Who had _____ in their teams?" In short, the participants were constantly presencing their virtual managerial skills on a platform where they could be constantly seen, analyzed and dissected. Teja's and Kaushik's motivations of play which were also echoed by most of the participant pool resonates in between the broad motivation categories of competition, social sport and self-esteem that are suggested by Billings and Ruihey (2013, 28-39). However, the element of presencing is something that gives these experiences a newer dimension that needs to be addressed.

Building a Squad

This section looks at what participants considered as key elements for successful play. All the nine participants agreed that the most important element was building the squad for week 1. The rules of *FPL* offer the virtual managers a fixed starting budget, which they must use to select 15 players across positions. The selection process is further complicated by the need for the squad to comply with a set of pre-set rules. With regards to more specific elements of squad selection, the participants were keen to delve into more detailed information and the various strategies they use to pick their teams.

"When I begin selecting my squad, I always try to select my team in a very unbiased and a very point-centric fashion. I look at stats from the previous year, carefully see their performances, then I try to arrive at a value for investment kinda thing. I look at how many points they got and how much of my budget are they eating into. I then look at filling all possible positions and then look at the fixture list. I always tinker to get just the right mix, it takes usually about 3-4 attempts till I am satisfied." (Teja, Personal Interview, 21 September 2017)

Rules and Deadlines

Several participants felt that the squad selection stage is the most challenging element in the game and it is at this stage that they most often encounter the rules of the game. All the participants agreed that complying with the rules of *FPL* is non-negotiable.

"It is impossible to try and cheat or something in this game, the budget is fixed, the rules are set and the team is not even saved if everything is not right. Along with the three-player per team rule, there are limits on number of transfers and then rules for substitutions; everything's carefully monitored. You can make more than the number of free transfers but then each extra change costs points." (Kaushik, Personal Interview, 15 August 2017)

While the rules for team selection are stringently enforced the participants pointed out there are time-based rules as well, which were quite difficult to comply with.

“The different times of start are often a challenge, there is no way to account for all of the matches and the schedules of no two weeks are the same. Sometimes matches begin as early as Thursday midnight, sometimes all of them are played on Sunday. The premier League scheduling has gone for a toss ever since they have begun to attract Asian viewership. Christmas and New Year are the worst, there is a matchday every two days at times.” (Teja, Personal Interview, 02 October 2017)

In order to stay abreast of these strict and varied timelines participants acknowledged using a variety of innovative measures to remain ahead and be ready to make any changes they desired.

“EPL matches can be a pain sometimes; the first match can be at 2 AM Indian time and it is extremely difficult to stay awake and watch it if it is not something you are interested to watch. I have found a way to sync the EPL calendar of matches with my Google calendar and always make sure to check that. Despite all these measures, I have found fixture schedules to change and it is not exactly a foolproof plan.” (Anabil, Personal Interview, 24 December 2017)

There were other ways, in which participants kept track of matches. One that was consistently applied was the use of football specific apps, which sent notifications prior to a match’s start along with lineup information. One of the other most popular ways that the participants seemed to have countered this issue with was after the launch of the official *FPL* app. The app was something they seemed to have found useful in terms of scheduling, as it occasionally sent notifications reminding the players about the specific time deadlines.

The participants’ individual strategies incorporating the various rules of *FPL* and the various time-based deadlines is indicative of the extent to which they have gone to internalize the rules as well as streamline the various facets of matches being played. Their understanding of the schedule and gaming of the apps’ notifications, awareness of when to use the rules to their advantage and their acceptance that the rules of *FPL* cannot be defied is indicative of the fact that the participant pool for the study consisted of an engaged and mature set of players.

Strategy and Information

In the interview sessions that took place after participants had built their squads and internalized the game’s rules, the conversation mostly gravitated towards the various strategies they had developed over time for their chosen squads. Most participants had clear ideas and approaches to the game once the season began, and our conversations showed that players consider a variety of factors while preparing for a season.

“The world of *FPL* is very dynamic; player values change every week depending on their performances and thus budgets and squads always need to be refreshed. The challenge is that if some player was excellent last season, he is definitely going to be unaffordable this season. It was the case with Vardy and Sanchez and I think it will be the same with Salah next year. Expect him to be

"I use *Goal*, *Onefootball* and *FTBPro* for news. I regularly check all three of them. Then after the news I look for information on statistics and from related data. I then use platforms like *Squawka* and *Opta*. Despite all this then I check other info on the *FPL* website. The site itself offers a lot of data; bringing them all together to make decisions is my way of doing things." (Teja, Personal Interview, 22 January 2018)

Most participants agreed that playing *FPL* had made them extremely knowledgeable about the league and they were now aware of players and teams at a level of detail they never expected.

“There are a lot of players I only know today because of *FPL*, players like Ighalo, Deeney, Vardy, Nyom, Hegazy, Albrighton, McCauley and so many more. None of them are stars and many of them are not even known to good football players but we track all of them.” (Prashant, Personal Interview, 22 December 2017)

The fact that players have acquired a mastery of the various facets of the English Premier League, its teams and its players make the fantasy model a means of popularizing the main media product, that is, Premier League football. By giving *FPL* players a point-based incentive to compete for and against, the fantasy model is forging a connection and a dedication that mere watching of matches cannot achieve (Deshbandhu 2017).

The Role of Fandom

Throughout my conversations with the participants, one thing that stood out was their dedication towards their teams. Participants like Kaushik, Teja, Prateek and Anabil made sure to watch every match of that their teams played. My observations in co-playing sessions as well as the data from the interviews suggested that they were all watching well over a hundred matches of football across the various top European leagues every year.

I also found all the participants extended their loyalties to their teams beyond watching matches, with their emotional connection translating into financial investments like acquisition of club merchandise in the form of jerseys, posters, footballs and other collectibles. At times during conversations, it was impossible to discern where the role of the avid *FPL* manager ended, and the passionate football fan took over. Thus, it became imperative to question their strategies and decision-making about their football club.

Some of the participants acknowledged that it was extremely difficult for them to separate the two and the fact that they knew so much about one team could work to their advantage.

"FPL is a game where come March all the teams more or less look the same as everyone has the same players who are doing well. In such cases you want as much advantage as possible. I know Chelsea very well and I have followed the career of Tammy Abraham closely, this year he was at Swansea and he got me quite a few points. The fact that I am a huge Chelsea fan gives me that edge at times." (Teja, Personal Interview, 02 October 2017)

As to how their loyalties dictated their team selection processes, most participants felt that *FPL* is supposed to be free of rivalries and prejudices and they need to do everything they can to select the best players as points are all that matter.

“Man, we need to select the best possible players, being a United fan and not taking players from City (Manchester) is impossible this season. I have players from City who have got me good points and it doesn’t matter one bit.” (Prateek, Personal Interview, 12 November 2017)

However, not all participants were as convinced with Prateek's logic; some along with club loyalties also embraced rivalries.

“There are two loyalties that we must consider here, first our loyalty to our team and secondly our loyalty to the *FPL* team. I am very lucky that Everton^{viii} are not very successful and I don’t have to face this choice often. However, when Fellaini was at Everton he was a super-star getting a bunch of points and he was very affordable too. I mulled over the decision carefully for months; it was a very difficult one to make. Eventually I had to get him as my loyalty to the *FPL* team won.” (Anabil, Personal Interview, 24 December 2017)

The analysis suggests that questions of loyalty and rivalry often only mattered to players who supported the traditionally big clubs^{ix}. Participants like Bhaibhav, who supports Leicester City, felt that he could not really do much if he built his team around players from his club or if he was overly picky. The best quote to succinctly understand how an *FPL* player negotiates with fandom would be as follows.

“Being a Chelsea fan, our biggest rivals are Arsenal and Tottenham. Tottenham, I just can’t stand them, but of late they have players like Harry Kane^x and Eriksen who have been very good. I have no other choice but to take them. While watching the matches, I root for Tottenham to lose but for Kane to score hat-trick; the best of both worlds.” (Teja, Personal Interview, 02 October 2017)

Knowledge Versus Chance

The discussions on information and the reliance of the participants on gathering as much knowledge as possible laid the foundation for some interesting perspectives relating to the debate on Agon and Alea. All the participants acknowledged that their performances in *FPL* were dependent on elements of chance and luck. This section of the paper focuses on not only the participants’ experiences but also the counter-measures they have developed.

“Luck is huge in football, so it is the same in *FPL* as well. I try to embrace luck as much as possible. If I am lucky my team will do well and if I am not, I deal with

Insights from the co-playing description above are very close to what Nee and Dozier propose in their paper on multi-screen use (Nee and Dozier 2017). The steady use of smartphones to watch how their teams are performing while watching two other teams in action has become a characteristic trait of the *FPL* player. The *FPL* app then becomes a window to matches not being televised/watched, to the performance of other players in the fantasy league as well as it becomes a news platform. Thus, the app becomes an augmented extension to watching televised sport. The *FPL* app can

What makes fantasy sport unique from other games that have been ludologically examined is the unique dialectic process between the elements of Agon and Alea; a process that is shrouded by unpredictability at every stage and a combination that is not offered by other game modes. This article is an attempt to re-position the game mode of fantasy sport in a manner that allows for studying the players/virtual

manager as well as a platform and a place for presencing (Poster 1997, Couldry 2004). By offering these unique entry points this article not only allows to critically examine the *FPL* experience but also offers a window to look at how the participants engage with the mediated football content. Following Couldry's practice approach, this paper presents unique, specific approaches and practices developed by players of the game from urban India, that provide a comprehensive lens to look at what users of fantasy sports do with the game (Couldry 2004).

The potential of this ludic and qualitative approach is further amplified by the fact that we can gain insights into the complex decision-making processes that dictate player decisions in fantasy sports. We are able to answer questions on identity and how the mediated content is streamlined, structured and consumed; but also, where these participants view themselves in the larger frame of the media sports cultural complex (Rowe 2004).

Gamified viewing coupled with the fact that the only way to counter chance and luck in fantasy sport is to put in more research, leaves the audiences primed for high levels of viewership; something that makes the *FPL* experience a vital cog in the EPL's pursuit of dedicated viewers and loyal fans in India. This trend contradicts what Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock (2009) suggest, when they call for the need to stop thinking of the association between sports and media but to think of sports as media (Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock 2009, 101). The findings from this article are more in line with Nee and Dozier who provide evidence that increase in frequency of complementary simultaneous media use can be linked to higher levels of engagement (Nee and Dozier 2017). With this gamified and engaged viewing from the spectators, the second-screen is not a distraction to the mediated content but a means of augmenting viewership interest and reinforcing dedication.

Juul, J., 2011. *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

